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ABSTRACT

Sex role development in children is based on the processes of social learning and cognitive development. According to social learning theory, the development and emergence of sex-typed behaviors and attitudes can be described by the same learning principles used to account for any other aspect of social behavior, generally principles related to reinforcement and imitation. The cognitive developmental approach adds that an important factor in sex role development is children's awareness of their own sex and their understanding that gender is a basically constant physical attribute. This research is about the effects of sex and vicarious reinforcement on imitation in first-grade children. The results indicate that children in pleasant settings observing non-sex-typed tasks with vicarious verbal reinforcement tend to imitate same-sex models. In threatening settings with vicarious verbal punishments between a male controller and a female model, children do not imitate the female since the male has ruled that she was wrong in the task. Further research under progress by the author is about the effect on children's attitudes of reversing the role in sex-stereotyped occupations in children's literature. (Author/DE)

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Sex-Roles and Social-Learning in Children

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as part of the panel

Psychology and Women: New Aspects of Research in Sex Role Socialization

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There are differences between the sexes: physiological, psychological, and social-role. Physiological sex differences, including body structure, function, and size, are obvious. A few psychological sex differences tend to be found consistently. According to Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), these include verbal ability (from 11 years of age through high school, females on the average are superior to males), visual-spatial ability (from adolescence on, males on the average are superior to females), mathematical ability (from 12-13 years, males on the average are superior to females), and aggression (from 2 years on, males on the average exhibit more verbal and physical aggression). Several others, including activity level, competitiveness, dominance, compliance, and nurturance, are open to question due to ambiguous findings and/or too little empirical evidence. Huge average social-role sex differences are consistently found in our culture; these include roles concerning the family and occupations.

I am interested in sex-role development, "the process through which children become psychological males or females" (Mischel, 1970, p. 3). This concept includes developmental study of sex-typed behaviors, attitudes, expectations, and attributions: how they originate and how they can be changed. My basic personal point of view is that regardless of innate sex differences, the process of assuming a role in a technological culture is a psychological/social process that in our culture is not very dependent on those sex differences. In many aspects, the environment in conjunction with internal, often non-sex-typed, characteristics of the person contributes limitations or enrichment opportunities that produce differences in the resulting sex-roles. Many of the occupational roles assumed by people in our culture illustrate this point.

Our culture does not create environments which allow for optimal flexibility in sex-role behaviors. Through the family, school, and other

cultural transmitters (television, books, neighbors, and peers), children are generally exposed to a status-quo, or sometimes retrogressive, picture of sex roles. They are exposed to the expected and accepted woman's careers: housewife, mother, nurse, and teacher. They also are exposed to the expected and accepted men's careers, a much broader selection including doctor, lawyer, chemist, President, etc. The cultural cues about behavior provide the message that it is acceptable for a girl to be a tomboy while it is forbidden for a boy to be a sissy (Money & Ehrhardt, 1972). Children are exposed almost exclusively to female teachers during preschool and elementary school. They are more often than not exposed to textbooks which present traditional and conservative views of appropriate sex-typed behaviors (Gersoni-Stavn, 1974). High school counselors and teachers continue the pattern by often steering students into traditional occupations and roles (Bingham & House, 1973; Schlossberg & Pietrofesa, 1973).

From the time a child is born, significant people around him/her begin to respond to the child at least partially on the basis of the child's sex. Choice of a name and color of clothes for the new child are usually related to sex. Other less obvious differences in adult attitudes and behaviors begin to occur. When asked at what ages parents should permit or expect behaviors such as playing with sharp scissors and crossing streets unsupervised, mothers of four-year-old girls responded with later ages than mothers of four-year-old boys (Collard, 1964).

And it has been clearly documented that children are being influenced by these forces in their environment; they are learning about sex roles. By the time a child is three years old, he/she usually can distinguish between the sexes and knows what sex he/she is (Brown, 1958; Kagan, 1971).

Soon after this, he/she begins to exhibit culturally appropriate sex-typed behaviors and attitudes (McCandless, 1967; Sears, Maccoby & Levin, 1957). Although different theories of sex-role development hypothesize different ages for sex-role ~~at which~~ "identification," that part of the self-concept that specifically relates to one's own feeling of femaleness or maleness or a combination, all agree that from birth through elementary school is a crucial time (see Mischel's review, 1970).

My approach to studying the process of sex-role development is basically a combination and extension of two theories: Social learning and cognitive-developmental. According to social learning theory, the development and emergence of sex-typed behaviors and attitudes can be described by the same learning principles used to account for any other aspect of a person's social behavior, generally principles related to reinforcement and imitation (Bandura, 1971; Mischel, 1966). These theorists also are beginning to put some emphasis on characteristics of the child that interact in this process: attentional factors and past reinforcement history are two that are often considered. The cognitive-developmental approach adds a developmental view: an important factor in sex-role development is the child's awareness of her/his own sex and of her/his understanding that gender is a basically constant physical attribute. I am attempting to combine these approaches to take more explicit account of subject characteristics, especially the point that each child is developing socially, affectively, and cognitively. The mechanisms postulated by social-learning theory (a combination of imitation and reinforcement) can be combined with a broadened developmental approach reminiscent of the cognitive-developmental theory. One way to do this is to search and organize the related literature in an attempt to see a pattern emerging

concerning the process mechanisms involved in sex-role development with regard to the subject characteristics of sex and age.

My research currently focuses on children from preschool through fifth grade. I want to know how children's behaviors in modeling situations vary depending on:

1. Characteristics of the child (sex, age, socioeconomic level, level of cognitive development, perception of parental sex-typed roles, level of sex-role development, and current sex-typed stereotypes);
2. Characteristics of other people, such as models, in the situation (sex, age, relationship to the child and perceived importance of those people to the child);
3. Characteristics of the task involved (sex-typed as opposed to non-sex-typed);
4. Other characteristics of the experimental situation (amount of information available to the child for use in determining the cultural and/or local rules about the sex-typed nature of the setting and task, e.g., direct or vicarious reinforcement).

For example, a colleague and I have completed a study in which the effects of sex and vicarious reinforcement on imitation were examined (Garrett & Cunningham, 1974). In that study, each first-grade child was taken to an experimental room by an adult experimenter (E) to watch an adult model (M) select one member from each pair of ten pairs of pictures of common objects. Depending on S's treatment condition, E (the controller of the verbal reinforcement) either verbally reinforced, verbally punished, or ignored M. S then picked his/her favorite from each pair, but in this case E made no approving or disapproving comments concerning S's choices.

The results of this study showed that the reward and ignore conditions did not differ in the frequency of children's matching responses to M's choices, but more matching occurred in both of them than in the punish condition. In the reward condition, Ss imitated same-sex Ms more than opposite-sex Ms, but there were no differences in the punish condition. A strong trend in the interaction of sex of E, M and S in the reward condition indicated that the highest imitation scores were from children exposed to like-sex E-M combinations; in the punish condition, however, the greatest amount of counterimitation occurred when both male and female children observed a male E-female M combination, the traditional cultural stereotype of parental interactions. So perhaps the message first-grade children are receiving is that in nice pleasant settings concerning non-sex-typed tasks (vicarious verbal reinforcement) imitate same-sex models, especially when a same-sex controller is present; in threatening settings (vicarious verbal punishment) with a male controller and a female model, do not imitate the female since the male has ruled that she was wrong.

So in that study we varied sex of child, model, and experimenter and verbal vicarious reinforcement. We used a non-sex-typed task (this was determined through a pilot study). We did not examine other characteristics of the people involved. We currently are extending this study and modifying the methodology to explore:

1. Sex of the child, model, and experimenter;
2. Developmental level of the child (age: first, third, and fifth grades);
3. Other characteristics of the child (perception of parental roles, current level of sex-role development, memory for the model's choices);
4. Vicarious verbal reinforcement.

I also am involved in another study that is much different from this one but still fits into the basic structure I described above. This project first involves measuring children's (first, third, and fifth graders) sex-stereotypes about a set of 40 occupations (Tuinman & Garrett, 1975). Then we plan to write a set of short stories about some of the occupations identified as sex-typed in which we reverse the stereotype (Garrett & Tuinman, 1975). For example, nurse is quite uniformly identified as a woman's occupation; we will write a story about a male nurse. The children will be exposed to the stories over a time period of a few weeks. We will again measure their occupational sex-stereotypes with regard to these specific occupations as well as other sex-typed occupations identified in the initial study but not used in the experimental materials. This study will serve as the basis for a set of studies designed to examine the duration and intensity of materials needed for attitude change in children in the sex-stereotyped area of occupations, length of time the changed attitudes last, relationship of child characteristics to attitude change, and alternate modes of stimulus materials to use in attitude change(live models, televised models, etc.)

I want to summarize by stating what I see as the critical areas to be examined through inquiry processes into the topic of sex-role development.

1. Examine models of sex-role behaviors separately from the issue of sex-role identification. Although identification may occur by age 6 or 7, as the major psychological theories suggest, sex-role behaviors continue to develop and to be modified across the whole life span. It is certainly possible to be internally-identified as a female and to act in ways considered

by our culture to be masculine or both masculine and feminine. There is little that is universal concerning social sex-roles. Cross-cultural studies clearly show this.

2. Determine developmentally under which conditions people acquire and perform sex-typed behaviors through observation; this determination must include the influence of characteristics of the people involved, too.
3. Determine developmentally how sex-typed norms and attitudes are related to people's perceptions of reality and what methods of changing sex-role stereotypes are most salient at different ages.
4. Combine social learning and cognitive-developmental theories to include the relevant aspects each contributes to sex-role development.

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